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## Inside Central Kentucky beekeepers' world

### Beekeeping rewarding despite recent problems

 By Dariush Shafa [Dshafa@herald-leader.com](mailto:Dshafa@herald-leader.com)

The sweet taste of success usually makes it easier to endure what comes along with it: the occasional sting.

Or three or four.

That's just a day in the life of a beekeeper, and Kentucky has about 400 statewide.

Bees are silent -- buzzing, actually -- partners in agriculture. With bees around, all is well. Without them: Chaos.

"Without the honeybee, we would not have the food sources we do," said Robin Mountain, a second-generation beekeeper originally from South Africa.

Bees are essential for pollinating apples, almonds, cucumbers, pumpkins and many other crops.

It's a tougher task lately, said Larry Blandford, who has 50 colonies in Fayette, Woodford and Jessamine



Dariush Shafa/Herald-Leader

Reyah Carlson, an apitherapist, let a bee sting the finger Ruthanne Cole, of Princeton, W. Va., during a beekeeping

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counties.

"Fifteen years ago, you didn't have all the problems," Blandford said. "You'd just stick them (hives) out there and let them go."

Mites, diseases and a problem called "colony collapse disorder" have made it rough of late.

Colony collapse disorder is a troubling and inexplicable problem, where honeybees abandon their hives and die off en masse. It's a big problem in some parts of the country, where tens of thousands of bees have been lost.

Though the cause is largely a mystery, many beekeepers attribute it to pesticides sprayed on the crops the bees pollinate. Fortunately, colony collapse disorder isn't as big a problem locally as the more common mites and diseases.

Despite the problems, beekeepers, like their winged workers, can do only one thing: Keep on keeping on.

"It's just things you've got to do," Blandford said. "It's not all roses."

### Brains and brawn

After 24 years among the hives, Blandford said the way bees behave and work makes him believe they are intelligent.

One indicator of bee intelligence is in the way they show others how to get to flowers with nectar. The bees will dance in a circle and waggle their tails. The pattern of the dance, based on the direction of the sun, tells other bees which direction to go. The length of the dance indicates distance.

Blandford also said he thinks bees are perceptive.

"Bees, I think, are like a dog," Blandford said. "If you're scared of them, they'll take advantage of you."

Bees aren't just smart, but also have a working spirit.

"Bees are born with responsibility. That means they're born with a job," he said.

The hard work starts with the queen. When a "good" queen rules over the hive, she will lay good eggs that turn into productive workers. Honey production will be high and the hive will prosper. Lower quality queens mean the hive will produce less and have more problems.

"The queen bee is the heart and soul of the hive, like mom is in the home," Blandford said.

In Kentucky, a single colony can have more than 60,000 bees and produce 60 to 80 pounds of honey per year. In Canada, a hive can produce as much as 400 pounds of honey per year.

"You don't need to know everything to keep bees. You do need Mother Nature on your side. She's a big help," Blandford said.

All the work is done by the worker bees, all females. They make honey, feed the queen, guard the hive and raise the young, called "brood."

The only male bees in the hive are the stingless drones, who only mate with the queen to fertilize eggs and then die.

"It takes a woman to sting you," Blandford said, adding that jokes aside, he only has one favorite type of honey.

"My wife," he said.

conference July 11 at Kentucky State University. Photo by Dariush Shafa | Staff



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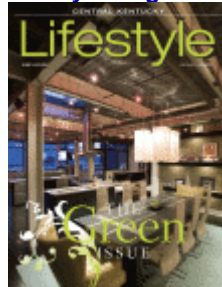
- 1 Queen per colony
- 60-80 Pounds of honey a hive can produce per year
- 400 Approximate number of beekeepers in Kentucky
- 60,000 Normal colony size



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#### Lifestyle Magazine



### Profit or pleasure

Mountain, who runs the Dadant beekeeping supply company branch in Frankfort and also is president of the Kentucky State Beekeeping Association, said the level of involvement varies greatly.

"In Kentucky, we walk the line between profit and pleasure," Mountain said.

Beekeepers are not limited to one special group. The unifying factor is that everyone who does it enjoys it, Mountain said.

"Who the hell opens a box with insects in it that want to sting you?" Mountain said.

The late Gov. Edward T. "Ned" Breathitt and his wife, Lucy, kept bees. Today, Lucy Breathitt still has 25 or so colonies of bees, which Mountain helps her run.

"I wanted to have bees to improve my farm, simple as that," Breathitt said. "I enjoy them because they're doing what I ask them to do. They make honey. It's wonderful."

Late summer is honey harvesting time.

"The rest of the year, we work for the bees," Breathitt said. "This time of year every day is like Christmas."

Mountain's wife, Stella, enjoys the business just as her husband does.

"Beekeeping is hard work, but it's very rewarding," Stella Mountain said. "Just to see people enjoy it, that's a good thing for me."

Stella Mountain said honey's natural properties make it alluring to make and use. Honey is high in proteins, amino acids and vitamins and also has some medicinal uses.

"I prefer using healthy ways of staying healthy rather than putting chemicals in our bodies," she said.

### Kept by bees

"The happier I can keep my bees, the happier I am," Robin Mountain said. He recently helped put together a conference at Kentucky State University on beekeeping.

"What I try to do in this region is introduce people and educate them about beekeeping," Robin Mountain said. "To see people gathering together to learn about it, it's absolutely fantastic."

Breathitt said once she and her husband got into bees, they were hooked, and her husband even won a blue ribbon for his honey in an anonymous competition at the Kentucky State Fair.

"I think it was his greatest moment," Breathitt said. "He took an awful lot of enjoyment out of it."

Mountain said he'd like to see the industry grow locally, particularly as farmers move to other crops.

"Especially with the tobacco being taken out, I'd like to see positive growth," he said. "The more people who can learn, the better it will be for the industry."

The cost of joining this hobby/industry is surprisingly low for those interested.

"It costs about \$300 to start up, and that's with all new equipment," said Kentucky State Apiarist Phil Craft, who heads beekeeping regulation through the state veterinarian's office.

Mountain said he also encourages people go into beekeeping because it is so beneficial for the environment.

"Beekeeping is the only form of agriculture that doesn't take from the environment. It gives back," Mountain said.

For him, it's given a little extra back. Mountain's first date with Stella Mountain when they lived in South Africa should have been a nice dinner, but his plans were ruined when he had to move bees to keep them from being killed by a farmer's spraying of pesticide.

"She said, 'That's the lamest excuse I've ever heard,'" he said, laughing.

Once he convinced her it was the truth, things changed.

"Then she said, 'Can I come along?'"

Now, 24 years later and a continent away, the two are bringing bees to others.

"I almost like to think of being a honeybee," Robin Mountain said of the time he spends educating and giving advice. "I like giving back to the community."

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*Reach Dariush Shafa at (859) 231-1368 or 1-800-950-6397, Ext. 1368.*

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